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RUEHCO/AMEMBASSY COTONOU 0000
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SIPDIS
GENEVA FOR MRA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/02/2018
TAGS: PREF CM NI
SUBJECT: NIGERIA: BAKASSI WITHDRAWAL AND REFUGEE ISSUES

REF: A. (A) LAGOS 224 [NOTAL]
 1B. (B) ABUJA 1201 [NOTAL]
 1C. (C) LAGOS 211 [NOTAL]

Classified By: PRM/AFR DIR MARGARET MCKELVEY FOR REASON 1.4(B-D)

11. (U) This is an action request. Please see paras 7 and 8.

12. (C) SUMMARY: Per reftels, the latest violence pending final handover of the Bakassi Peninsula to Cameroon has generated a flow of some 3000-4000 individuals who have crossed into Ikang in Nigeria's Cross River State since June 12008. They have been sheltering in a government primary school where they are reportedly straining the capacity of local authorities to respond. Nigerian villagers in proximity to the Bakassi are reportedly anxious about the prospect of absorbing those who may relocate voluntarily and/or flee to Nigeria once Cameroon assumes full control. Presumably those moving from the Bakassi to Nigeria will be accepted as Nigerian citizens; any possibility of Bakassi residents becoming stateless should be nipped in the bud. While those sheltering in Ikang are not technically refugees (unless they claim Cameroonian citizenship), UNHCR should be in a position to advise, if not materially aid, the Nigerian authorities. The Red Cross system, which has been building capacity to respond to periodic internal violence and displacement, should also be in a position to help. And given the presence of militants who might resist the final handover, contingency planning for additional inflows would be prudent. END SUMMARY.

Background

13. (C) Reftels (being e-mailed to RMA Geneva) describe the flight of an estimated 3000-4000 individuals from the Bakassi Peninsula into Ikang in Nigeria's Cross River State since June 9 attacks on Cameroonian gendarmes by militant youths protesting the upcoming August 14, 2008 transfer of the territory from Nigeria to Cameroon pursuant to the 2002 UN

International Court of Justice judgment on the disputed region. Subsequent detention by the Cameroonian authorities of some 300-500 able-bodied young men from the area led several thousand women, children, and elderly men to flee. According to the Cross River State and MFA officials with whom AmConsul Lagos and Embassy Abuja have spoken, these people are in a refugee-like status sheltering in a government primary school and are in need of blankets, food, and medicines as well as a more sanitary environment. The Nigerian Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and Cross River State authorities have provided some, but not enough, assistance. Despite requests, UNHCR/Nigeria has not visited Ikang. The State Government has located a rural place where it intends to relocate the displaced) some have already moved out on their own to pursue livelihoods in fishing -- but it is suspected that the land will not be acceptable to them as they would prefer some virgin land at some distance from Bakassi. Moreover, villagers located in proximity to the Bakassi are reportedly not anxious to share with the newcomers.

Status of the Uprooted

¶4. (C) Reflets suggest that those who fled to Ikang consider themselves to be Nigerians. As such, they would not be refugees, though their needs might well be similar to those of returning refugees, particularly if they do not have a place of origin to which they can return. The 2002 UN International Court of Justice judgment requires Cameroon to protect the rights, infrastructure and welfare of the Nigerian inhabitants of the Bakassi peninsula, who presumably will be allowed to become Cameroonian citizens if they so desire. Presumably those moving from the Bakassi to Nigeria will be accepted as Nigerian citizens. Of course there have been some residents of the Bakassi arguing for autonomy or even independence. What we want to avoid is the possibility of any Bakassi residents becoming stateless in the final transfer of authority. (Note. One of the mandates of the UNHCR is to prevent statelessness. End note.)

Protection and Assistance for the Uprooted

¶5. (SBU) While those sheltering in Ikang are not technically refugees (unless they are claiming Cameroonian citizenship), and while the Cross River State authorities and NEMA appear to have done a very credible job of providing the necessary protection and assistance (even if there are not enough blankets and the like) UNHCR could reasonably be expected to provide some advice and guidance based on its expertise in camp management/coordination and refugee return/reintegration. The International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Federation of Red Cross/Crescent Societies have worked with the Nigerian Red Cross for years on building capacity to respond to displacement caused by communal conflict so the Red Cross system should also be a resource in addressing the current situation.

Contingency Planning for Further Displacement

¶6. (C) Dissatisfaction by Nigerians living in Bakassi who object to becoming Cameroonian citizens or living under Cameroonian control is reportedly high. Per ref B, in a June 18 meeting, Tony Eze, Director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) East and Central Africa Division, affirmed the GON's overall commitment to meeting the terms of the 2006 Greentree Agreement, signed by former President Obasanjo, but voiced a great deal of frustration at Cameroon's handling of recent violence, and its general lack of cooperation in bilateral and regional matters. Eze also hinted that Nigeria might not remain committed to a date-specific total withdrawal if Cameroon continued to "violate" the terms of this and other agreements. In the run-up to and the aftermath of the August 14 handover of the rest of the Bakassi from Nigeria to Cameroon, tensions could be expected to increase. Additional displacement could well

be expected and it would be prudent for authorities in both Nigeria and Cameroon to have thought through where victims of violence might be sheltered and/or ultimately relocated. Both UNHCR and the Red Cross could be helpful to the authorities and should be doing their own contingency planning.

Action Requests

¶7. (C) For Abuja, Lagos, and Yaounde: Suggest that you meet with UNHCR and ICRC locally to urge appropriate attention to the current group of displaced in Ikang and to urge contingency planning for any further displacement around the time of the handover. Also, please advise whether there is any danger of Bakassi residents becoming stateless, discuss same with UNHCR, and, if you judge that there is danger, provide recommendations for any steps you think necessary to forestall it.

¶8. (SBU) For Geneva: Mission is requested to review the Bakassi issue with both UNHCR and ICRC, urging support to the Nigerian (and eventually Cameroonian) authorities in their response to the current displacement as well as with respect to contingency planning.

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